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GNOSTIC SOURCES AND THE PREHISTORY OF THE *DESCENSUS AD INFEROS*

The scope of this paper is to revisit the attestations of the theme of the Descensus ad Inferos *in some Gnostic sources, direct or indirect, (among them,* Trimorphic Protennoia *[NHC XIII,1],* Teachings of Silvanus *[NHC VII,4] and Irenaeus*' Adversus Haereses*), in order to evaluate their relationship to the "classical" witnesses of the Descensus, including the so-called* Gospel of Nicodemus (*or* Acta Pilati).

L'objectif de cet article est de reconsidérer les attestations du thème du Descensus ad inferos *dans quelques sources gnostiques, directes ou indirectes (dont la* Pensée première à la triple forme [*NH XIII, 1*], *les* Enseignements de Silvanos [*NH VII, 4*] *et Irénée*, Adversus haereses*), et de montrer leur relation avec les témoins « classiques » du* Descensus, *y compris l'*Évangile de Nicodème *(ou* Actes de Pilate*)*.

In an effort to elucidate, to whatever extent possible, the prehistory of the theme of the *Descensus Christi ad inferos*, as it has been dramatized in the *Acta Pilati* and in the *Gospel of Nicodemus,* this paper revisits a number of Gnostic sources, most of which are found in the Nag Hammadi collection of papyri[1].

Despite the numerous interpretive problems which researchers face when dealing with the early Christian sources, it can be said that the idea of Christ descending into Hell in the interval between his death on the cross and his resurrection is, in one form or another, attested as early as the end of the first century and the beginning of the second. Whatever their "original" meaning may have been, texts such as Matt 12:40, Rom 10:7, Eph 4:8-9 (citing Ps 68:18) and particularly 1 Pet 3:19-20 and 4:6 served very early on as points of departure for the development of the belief that Christ had visited the lowest parts

1. For a clear and well-informed overview of the literary and historical situation of this text, see Izydorczyk, Dubois 1997.

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of the universe, vanquished the Devil and his powers, and liberated the Just who were waiting for their final salvation[2]. In the second century, this idea is echoed in many texts, as diverse as the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (for ex. *Magn*. 9:2) and the *Odes of Solomon* (espec. 42:11-18). Justin Martyr quotes, under the name of Jeremiah, a passage which offers, despite its brevity, a vivid evocation of the predication of the Lord God to "his dead" and of his descent into the "land of the graves"[3]. This pseudo-Jeremiah is cited five times by Irenaeus[4]. Another *agraphon*, on the voice and aspect (εἶδος) of Christ, is also quoted by Clement of Alexandria: "Accordingly the Scripture says, Hades says to Destruction, We have not seen his form, but we have heard his voice"[5].

The *agrapha* preserved by Justin and Clement, and the 42nd *Ode of Solomon*[6] are among the earliest witnesses of a "mise en récit" (emplotment)[7] or dramatization of the descent of Christ into Hell. But the most developed – not to say *standard* – narration of this episode is to be found in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, more precisely in the so-called Greek recension B (or M according to Gounelle)[8], the διήγησις, chap. 17-27, and in the Latin versions A, B and C[9]. None of the ancient oriental translations of the Gospel contains the *Descensus ad inferos*. The oldest form of the account of Christ's descent into Hell seems to be the one attested by the Latin version A[10], since it is transmitted in 9th century manuscripts[11]. Nevertheless, various indications suggest that a Latin *lettré* penned the story of Christ's

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2. On Eph, see Harris 1996, and on 1 Pet, Gounelle 2004; Elliott 2000, p. 706-710.

3. *Dial*. 72 :4, ed. Bobichon 2003, p. 382.

4. *Adv. Haer*. 3,20,4 (under the name of Isaiah in the old Latin translation, but the Armenian version has Jeremiah); 4,22,1; 4,33,12; 5,31,1; *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 78.

5. *Stromata* 6,45,1, ed. Descourtieux 1999, p. 150-152, trans. in Roberts, Donaldson 1994, p. 490; on this *agraphon*, see Gounelle 2000, p. 41-47.

6. Ed. Harris, Mingana 1916, p. 85-86; trans. and comm. Lattke 2009, p. 582-606.

7. I borrow the expression "mise en récit" from Gounelle 2000, p. 41; the neologism "emplotment" belongs to the jargon of narratology.

8. Ed. Tischendorf 1876, p. 287-332; Gounelle 2008.

9. Ed. Tischendorf 1876, p. 333-432; on the Latin versions of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, see Izydorczyk 1997.

10. A more recent edition has been provided by Kim 1973; a French translation, based on a new, still unpublished, critical text, is to be found in Gounelle, Izydorczyk 1997.

11. Gounelle, Izydorczyk 1997, p. 101.

visit to the netherworld as early as in the 6th century as a complement to the *Gospel of Nicodemus* [12].

As for the Greek rendition of the *Descensus ad inferos*, found in the Greek recension B, or M, its most recent editor dates it between the 7th and 10th century, more probably at the end of the 9th or the beginning of the 10th century[13]. According to Rémi Gounelle, this recension is the translation of a Latin form of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* comprising a narrative of the descent of Christ into Hell, which means that "the extant Greek form of the *Descensus* is most likely a late adaptation from Latin"[14].

Even if the Greek and Latin manuscripts of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* which include the *Descensus* episode are relatively late, this does not necessarily mean that the composition of that episode dates from that period. The question is whether it is possible to postulate the existence of a text which could serve as the common and ultimate source of the Latin and Greek forms of the *Descensus* as we know it from the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. Despite a long and heated debate around this question, to date no satisfactory proposition has been put forward. There are of course many texts – homelies or sermons – which relate the descent of Christ in the underworld in terms very close to those of our *Gospel*[15]. But it appears difficult, if not impossible, to conclude with certainty that these texts and *Nicodemus* go back to a common Greek source which is now lost to us. Nevertheless and even if the *Descensus* was written in Latin sometime in the 6th century and appended to the *Gospel of Nicodemus*[16], it would be hard to imagine that early literary traditions had not provided a narrative and dramatized account of the descent of Christ into Hell. At any rate, this is what the Gnostic sources to which we now turn suggest.

The first and most important of those sources is a writing bearing the post-scripted title *Trimorphic Protennoia*, "*First Thought in Three Forms"*, one of the forty-six treatises found in the collection of Coptic papyri discovered at Nag Hammadi, Upper Egypt, in December 1945[17]. Attested by a single manuscript, *Trimorphic Protennoia* is manifestly the translation of a lost Greek original. The treatise is the first of two texts which have survived in what remains of Codex

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12. *Ibid*., p. 118.

13. Gounelle 2008, p. 70.

14. Izydorczyk, Wydra 2007, p. 17.

15. For a list of them, see Izydorczyk 1997, p. 48, n. 23.

16. Gounelle, Izydorczyk 1997, p. 117-118.

17. Editions and translations of the treatise : Layton 1987, 86-100; Turner 1990; Poirier 2006; Turner 2007; Poirier 2007. For an introduction to and a detailed commentary on the treatise, see Poirier 2006.

XIII of the Nag Hammadi collection. The text of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* is divided into three sections, or discourses, each of them clearly identified by a separate subtitle: "The Discourse of the Protennoia" (p. 42,3); "On Fate" (p. 46,4); "The Discourse of the Manifestation" (p. 50,21). As regards its literary form, *Trimorphic Protennoia* is essentially a lengthy proclamation by a feminine entity who, using the well-known ἐγώ εἰμι formula, introduces herself at the very beginning of the text as the *prōtennoia*, the "First Thought". In this, *Trimorphic Protennoia* resembles two other Nag Hammadi texts, namely, *Thunder: Perfect Mind* (NHC VI,2)[18], and the final hymn of the long version of the *Secret Book* (or *Apocryphon*) *of John* (NHC II,1 and IV,1)[19]. *Trimorphic Protennoia* is indeed a reworking, in the form of a revelatory discourse, of the final hymn, combined with other traditions. The unknown author of the treatise developed the hymn in two ways: first, by combining its three-part structure with the triad of Father, Mother and Son borrowed from the *Secret Book* itself, and, second, by using the triad of sound (*hroou*/φθόγγος), voice (*smē*/φωνή) and word (λόγος), borrowed from speculations of contemporary logicians and grammarians[20]. By identifying the Son with the Word, the author was able to engage in a polemical reinterpretation of the Johannine Prologue, an element not found in the final hymn[21]. I have shown elsewhere that *Trimorphic Protennoia*'s composition and redaction must be subsequent to the composition and redaction of the long version of the *Secret Book of John*, on which it clearly depends[22]. The treatise must have been composed, towards the end of the second century at the earliest, in an environment where the *Secret Book* and related works were being read and commented upon, an environment open to various religious and philosophical influences, apparently Christian, but "gnostic" in character. This was likely somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean; perhaps Egypt, or Syria.

At the end of the first "discourse" of the First Thought (40,29–41,33), we find images and vocabulary which are characteristic of the descriptions of the descent of Christ into Hell. This symbolic material is used by the author of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* to develop an affirmation of his main source, the final hymn of the longer recension of the *Secret Book of John*, in which we read that, as a result of the first two descents of the Pronoia, "the foundations of chaos

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18. Ed. and transl. MacRae 1979 and Poirier 1995.

19. II 30,11–31,27; IV 46,23–49,8, ed. Waldstein, Wisse 1995, 169-175; on the final hymn, see Waldstein 1995 and Painchaud, Barc 1999.

20. See Poirier 2006, 105-113.

21. Cf. *ibid*., p. 68-81, and Poirier 2010.

22. *Ibid*., p. 122.

shook" (30,19-20.27-28). On this basis, the author of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* works out a dramatic depiction of the salvific intervention of "First Thought" in the lower world:

> I shall tell you a mystery that is ineffable and indescriptable for [any] mouth.
>
> For you, I loosed all the fetters and broke the bonds of the demons of Hades, bonds that were bound to my limbs and worked against them.
>
> And I threw down the high walls of the darkness,
>
> And I broke open the solid gates of the merciless and split their bolts.
>
> And the evil agency, who strikes you, who impedes you, the tyrant, the adversary, the ruler, the real enemy, as for all of these, I taught them about my own, the offspring of the light:
>
> So that they might become loosened from all these and rescued from all the fetters, and might enter the place where they had been in the beginning.
>
> (41,2-20; transl. LAYTON 1987, p. 94)

In this excerpt, we find the following elements which will become, if they were not already, required ingredients of any description of the descent of Christ into Hell:

— the fetters and bounds (41,4-6);

— the walls of the darkness (41,7-9);

— the gates and the bolts (41,9-11).

A fourth element appears later in the treatise, in a passage of the second "discourse" which describes a dispute between the Archigenetor and his Powers, along the lines of a scenario evoking the *contentio Satanae et inferni*[23] in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*:

> Those who follow destiny gave up their numerous circuits along the way. And they said to the Powers, "What is this disturbance and this movement that has come over us from a sound that belongs to the superior voice? All our house has moved; the whole circuit of our ascent has gone to ruin; the way on which we travel and which leads us up to the Archigenetor of our birth is no longer established!"
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> Next, the Powers answered, saying, "We too are at a loss as to this (disturbance). For we do not know whom it belongs to. But arise, let us go to the Archigenetor and ask it."
>
> The Powers all gathered and went to the Archigenetor. [They said to] him, "Where is your boasting of which [you] boasted? Did we not [hear you say], 'It is I who am God; [it is I who am] your father; it is I who

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23. A title I borrow from TISCHENDORF's edition of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* 20 (1876, p. 424).

> engendered you; there is no other apart from me'? Well, now behold–there has been shown forth a sound that belongs to the invisible voice of [the eternal realm] that we do not recognize. And for our part at least [we have not] recognized whom we belong to. For, that sound which we heard is alien to us, and we do not recognize it, we do not know where it comes from. It has come and instilled fear in our midst and limpness in the joints of our legs." (…)
>
> "For our tree from which we sprouted bears fruit of ignorance, and also there is death in its leaves; darkness dwells in the shadow of its branches; and we have harvested it deceitfully and with desire. It is by this (tree) that ignorant chaos has come to be our dwelling place. For behold he too, the Archigenetor of our birth, of whom we boast, even he does not know about the voice!"
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> (43,17–44,29; trans. Layton 1987, p. 96, slightly modified)

The classical tradition of the descent into Hades or the underworld, the so-called κατάβασις or νέκυια, refered to by some commentators, does not account for the way in which the *Trimorphic Protennoia* makes use of the symbolism of the *Descensus ad inferos*[24]. Many elements of the Greco-Roman *katabasis* were of course taken up in the early Christian literature, but those found in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* are decidedly of another kind[25]. The *Trimorphic Protennoia* does not tell simply of a visit to the underworld or an encounter with the spirits of the dead. Already in this treatise, we find the full-fledged *mise-en-scène*, outlined in sources more or less contemporary with the *Trimorphic Protennoia,* and which emerges in later witnesses of the *Descensus*, including the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and the *Gospel of Bartholomew*. In addition to the the 42nd *Ode of Solomon* mentioned earlier, we may add the *Teachings of Silvanus* (NHC VII,4)[26], the *Acts of Thomas*[27] and the *Pistis Sophia*[28].

If the author of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* integrated into his work certain descriptive features of the *Descensus*, he nevertheless submitted them to a radical reinterpretation. Even if the vocabulary and the images are the same, the *Trimorphic Protennoia* does not evoke a descent into Hell but rather into the world, the world in which the Gnostics are emprisonned, the Chosen Ones to whom the Protennoia brings light and salvation. From the perspective of the treatise, it is therefore our very world which is the real Tartaros, where

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24. For example, Turner 1990, p. 378 and 444.

25. On the *katabasis*, see Ganschinietz 1919 and Bauckham 1998, spec. p. 19-32

26. P. 103,23–104,14; 110,14–111,4; cf. Peel 1979.

27. 10,4; 156,2.

28. 65 (p. 133,16-18); 81 (p. 179,25–180,15); on these texts, see Poirier 1983.

the "members" of the Protennoia are enslaved to the Archigenetor. Such a reinterpretation of the traditional scenario of the *Descensus* is not exclusive to the *Trimorphic Protennoia*; it is attributed to the Gnostics by Irenaeus of Lyons, who accuses them of saying that "the lower world is this world of ours"[29].

I would conclude this paper with three observations. Firstly, the *Trimorphic Protennoia* should be considered as a witness of the *Descensus ad inferos* in the strict sense of the expression, and not simply as a Christian variety of the Greco-Roman *katabasis*. Secondly, on the basis of the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, it appears that, as early as the end of the 2nd century, the literary dramatization of the *Descensus ad inferos* was, if not already fully developed, at least well sketched out. Finally, all this means that the *Trimorphic Protennoia* stands as a witness to the (pre)history of the literary theme of the *Descensus*, which was to find its fullest expression in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.

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29. "Dicunt (*sc*. the Gnostics) inferos quidem esse hunc mundum qui sit secundum nos" (ed. ROUSSEAU, DOUTRELEAU, MERCIER 1969, p. 392).

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